

# Chapter 12

*I* pressed dial on my uncle's number yet again, and stared out the car window while it rang. If I was calling the wrong number I would have gotten a recording, or someone unfamiliar on the line. But it didn't go to a recorded operator or a stranger, instead it rang and rang into an expanding, endless, suffocating void. I imagined my uncle at the other end of the line, looking down at his vibrating phone, recognizing my number, and then shrugging as he walked away from it. I understood that Uncle Ian was most likely just asleep, or indisposed, not willfully ignoring my call, but it was easy to imagine him ignoring me in order to teach me a lesson. Whatever was happening, I was determined to keep calling until he answered.

I got out of the car and left its warmth to head back into the station. I didn't want the police to think I'd disappeared and that my son had been abandoned. I wasn't going anywhere, and they were going to let me see him, even if I had to make a scene to make that happen.

But when I stepped passed the threshold back into the police station, I found a scene already in progress. The woman I'd been sitting across from was now standing in the middle of the waiting area, arguing with an officer that was in front of her, one hand on his holster, the other pointing in her face. "Lower your

phone,” he commanded loudly. “Now.” I glanced at a sign high on the wall with a picture of a crossed-out video recorder. “No video recordings in the station.” The officer lunged forward but the woman swerved before he was able to grab the phone I now saw in her hand.

“I done, I done,” she said, dropping the device into her oversized purse. She turned sharply from the officer and walked back to her seat. Everyone stared at her.

It occurred to me only in that moment that the room was being monitored. That within seconds, an officer could be through the side door, hand on hip, authority bearing down on you. All of my intentions to enter the station and demand action for my son disappeared. I was out of my element. I’d been at the station for over an hour, and I still had no idea how the place worked. I realized that I could make things worse for Miles if I wasn’t careful. It had taken me decades to learn, but I was old enough now to know that I shouldn’t make things worse by blindly arguing with those in charge.

I returned to my seat, across from the woman who was now busy rifling through her purse. She glanced my way and gave me a wry, half-smile. I returned it, grateful for any small bit of sympathetic commiseration. Eventually she brought out a compact and powdered her nose, pressing her lips together in a frown. Carefully she patted the mound of hair behind her wrap. I recognized what she was doing. She was restoring her confidence through a reassurance of her good looks.

My son sometimes did that too. I know that all mother’s think their children are the handsomest, the best looking in their class, but in Miles’ case it really was true. Miles had been blessed with large, almond-shaped eyes, a strong jaw, and dimples that made your heart melt. When we finally got a handle on his hair, he was breathtaking. It had taken awhile to get a handle on his hair, however. I only realized how bad I was doing when Miles came home from school in the fourth grade and told me that the other kids teased him about it, calling it pokey.

“Pokey?” I asked.

“Yeah, they say it pokes their fingers when they touch it.”

“Why are they touching it?”

“I don’t know,” Miles said, shrugging, “but they do.”

When Miles was very young, I had dealt with his hair by cutting it myself; by grabbing a peanut clipper and shaving his head close every three to four weeks. In my experience, most mothers cut their children’s hair when they were young, and even if it looked somewhat unprofessional, no one cared. Having your mother give you a bad haircut was a rite of passage. One white mother we had a playdate with when Miles was very young didn’t even seem to realize I was the one taking care of Miles’s hair. Apropos of nothing she turned to me during the playdate and said, “It must be nice to have a child whose hair doesn’t grow.” After I got over my surprise at her ignorance, I felt a tug of pride that she thought my son’s hair looked just like every other Black boy’s hair.

But as Miles got older, and in particular after we moved into the all-white neighborhood, he began to struggle against the close-cropped shaves. I sat him down for the usual haircut one day and he turned to me before we started and asked if he could have Henry Danger hair - that blonde kid on Nickelodeon who pretends to be a superhero, and has smooth, flowing yellow locks.

“O-kaay,” I’d replied in the moment, buying time to think of a good way to explain to my son that he couldn’t have the blonde, straight hair he wanted. I eventually told him that none of us actually ever got the hair we wanted. I had always wanted bouncy red curls, like Annie, when I was his age, and I never got them. No one in life got exactly what they wanted. He nodded, and for the moment, seemed to understand.

A few weeks later, however, when it was time for another buzz cut, Miles asked for Harry Potter hair. This time, I visibly sighed. “Honey,” I told him straight, “you’ve got dark, curly, Black boy hair. You will always have this kind of hair, like, like,” I struggled for a minute to think of a character he could identify with, “like George in Captain Underpants.”

Miles nodded, he was listening, though I wasn’t certain if he was understanding.

“It doesn’t matter how I cut your hair, baby, or what we try to do to it,” I said, feeling vaguely as if this were my fault, “but we can’t straighten your hair like Harry Potter, or Henry

Danger, or most of the other superheroes. I'm sorry baby. But," I added, touching my son's cheek, "I think your hair is beautiful. I don't think you should want to change a thing about it."

Miles nodded and didn't argue, but after a minute he asked if we could at least grow it longer. "Sure," I said, "of course." We put the clippers away and didn't bring them out again for months. His hair grew longer, the curls tighter, the look a bit unruly. I didn't concern myself with it much until Miles told me the other kids were calling it pokey.

"Let's go to a stylist," I said to Miles that day. "Get your hair done right, by somebody who knows what they're doing."

"Can't you just do it? Can't you make it look better?" Miles seemed to think I could do anything, which was sweet, but not always helpful.

"I can't. I don't know how. I never went to school to study hair," I said, trying to explain things. "There are people who practice and train to style hair really well. It's their job, like mommy's job is at the bank. We can take you to someone whose job is hair."

"Ok," Miles agreed, and I suddenly felt terrible I'd waited so long to take him.

Part of the reason, to be honest, that I'd waited so long was that there was nowhere in our neighborhood I could take him. I called a few local shops to make an appointment, but they all told me they didn't cut African American hair. I couldn't ask any of my white neighbors where they went, of course. I thought about it and recalled a barber shop I'd driven by in our old neighborhood, a cute place with an actual barber pole out front and an entirely Black clientele - as best could be seen through the window - inside. I figured we'd try there.

We drove up one cool spring afternoon and parked in a small back lot with crumbling asphalt, the difference between our old and new neighborhoods apparent. Cigarette butts littered the ground, loud music emanated from broken windows across the street, and cars raced by us so fast Miles stumbled. We approached the barber shop door together, Miles' hand in mine, our feet stepping past the entrance one after the other. As the door tinkled shut behind us, a wide sea of black male faces confronted

us. I had expected to be the only white person in the establishment, that wasn't a surprise, but what I hadn't prepared for, was to be the only woman in the room. There wasn't a single other female in sight. My ignorant mother mistake for that day, had been to fail to realize that barber shops in the Black community were mainly for men. Women had their own salons. And obviously, white people didn't come around to either.

An embarrassed heat came over me in waves, but I walked forwards, pretending that nothing was amiss, feeling like I couldn't back out now. All conversation died around us, as if when we moved forward, we parted a Red Sea of sound. I tried to smile and look everyone in the eye. I pretended to know what I was doing.

After what appeared to be the salon owner acknowledged our existence with a head nod, Miles and I sat on a corner bench and waited. A thin, elderly man with warm brown folds of skin eventually came over to us. "Where you from?" he asked.

I urged Miles to answer the man. "Here," my son said coolly.

"My name's Aaron," the man said, holding out his hand for Miles to shake. Miles reached over and took it. I could tell, despite the hesitancy of his manner, that Miles liked Aaron, he liked being spoken to as if he were an adult. The two of them struck up a conversation, and I switched seats with my son to get out of their way.

As they talked, I glanced around the barbershop. It was L shaped, with the entrance door at the corner of the L where the two sides came together. A couple of barber chairs and a very long mirror were along the length of the long side, and a black bench snug against the wall was placed along the short side. A number of other customers besides ourselves were waiting for haircuts. Three large televisions hung from the ceiling in various spots, and while no one seemed to be watching them, at odd intervals a customer would shout out some commentary, and everyone would immediately respond with grunts of agreement or disagreement. The room would go from near silence to a chorus of interjections and shouts, to near silence again as the televisions themselves were barely audible. There seemed to be an invisible

communication mechanism swirling around the establishment, one which I was definitely not privy to. I felt stupid. I wondered if there was somewhere else I could have taken Miles for a haircut. I cursed the world for being so segregated.

Then I glanced at my son, and his new friend Aaron, and saw how happily they were chatting away. My son had turned his whole body towards Aaron and was actively engaged in the conversation. Aaron noticed me watching them and smiled. I relaxed. Miles was still too young to notice all of my dumb mistakes, and how little I understood what I was doing as his mother. But, I also knew, he was growing up, and one day he would notice everything I did, and be embarrassed by me. One day, but not yet that day.

When it was at last my son's turn to get his hair cut, Aaron pushed him forwards towards a chair and he plopped himself down as if he'd sat there a hundred times. Gone was the fidgetiness my son exhibited every time I cut his hair, no more were the constant interruptions and questions about everything that popped into his head. Miles sat in the barber's chair a paragon of deference and respectability, and I wondered for a second whose child he was.

When we left the barbershop a little while later Miles had a smile on his face, a fancy new haircut that was definitely not pokey, and a new set of Black friends that I knew we would be returning to. I should have taken him to get a proper haircut years earlier, but in the moment, I focused my annoyance not on myself, but on our neighborhood, and on the fact that there was nowhere closer like this for us to go. It had taken nearly the whole of a Saturday afternoon to drive out to the old neighborhood and wait for a haircut; I now didn't have time to go grocery shopping like I'd wanted to. But looking at my smiling son in the rear-view mirror, I knew it had been worth it.

When Miles returned to school the following Monday, things seemed to improve. He told me the other kids liked his haircut, Hunter even telling him that he looked just like Fresh Prince and yelling a friendly, "Hey, homey!" to him in the hall.

"He says what?" I asked.

## SEEKING FORGIVENESS

“Hey, homey,” Miles repeated, proud, but now a little uncertain. “It’s like I’m one of them,” he paused, “right?”